United Nations

EP

Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme

Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/GC.17/29
7 April 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Seventeenth session
Nairobi, 10-21 May 1993

ITEM 7:* PROGRAMME MATTERS, INCLUDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAN OF ACTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

EVALUATION OF ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS CENTRE FOR URGENT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSISTANCE

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The United Nations Centre for Urgent Environmental Assistance was established on an experimental basis in early 1992 for a period of eighteen months, in accordance with decision 16/9 of the Governing Council. The present report provides a summary review and evaluation of the various activities undertaken by the Centre and draws conclusions on the experience gained during the initial period. The report contains proposals for further work to complete the experimental phase in light of the requirements of Agenda 21 and the perceived need to develop the Centre further as a switchboard and clearing-house for environmental emergencies, in close cooperation with other emergency response mechanisms within the United Nations system and elsewhere.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing council may wish:

- To note the report of the Executive Director on the evaluation of activities of the United Nations Centre for Urgent Environmental Assistance;

- To note with appreciation the work undertaken by the Centre so far;

- To note also that, although many positive achievements have been made during the experimental phase, there is a need to take into consideration Agenda 21, to define further the Centre's role and scope, its relations and operational links with potential partners in the United Nations system, in particular with the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), Geneva, as well as with other existing or planned emergency response mechanisms, and its relations with countries, both donor countries and affected developing countries;

---

* Refers to the number of the item on the Provisional Agenda (UNEP/GC.17/1).

Na.93-0239 150493

/...

- To request the Executive Director, in the light of the above, to extend the experimental phase for a further two-year period with a view to maximizing the cost-effectiveness of the Centre by harmonizing its work with that of other existing or emerging mechanisms;

- To urge those Governments that are in a position to do so to contribute additional resources to support the work of the Centre to enable it to complete the experimental phase;

- To request the Executive Director to report on the results obtained to the Governing Council at its next regular session.

EVALUATION OF ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS CENTRE FOR URGENT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSISTANCE

Introduction

1. The Governing Council at its sixteenth session, in 1991, in its decision 16/9 endorsed the Executive Director's proposal to proceed with the development, on an experimental basis, of a United Nations Centre for Urgent Environmental Assistance, and decided to establish the Centre at the beginning of 1992 for a period of eighteen months with the appropriation proposed by the Executive Director to cover up to four Professional staff members and a senior consultant as the necessary support staff.

2. The Council also requested the Executive Director to undertake, in consultation with other members of the United Nations system, an evaluation of the activities of the body and to report thereon to the Governing Council at its seventeenth regular session. A summary of the findings is annexed to the present report.

3. The United Nations Secretary-General's report on monitoring, assessment and anticipation of environmental emergencies prepared in response to General Assembly Resolution 44/224 of 22 December 1989, was submitted to the Governing Council at its sixteenth session (UNEP/GC.16/17) and subsequently to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session. Having considered the report, the General Assembly, in its resolution 46/217 of 20 December 1991, stressed the need to strengthen international cooperation in the monitoring, assessment and anticipation of environmental threats and in rendering assistance in cases of environmental emergency. The General Assembly invited the Secretary-General to convey his report to the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Agenda 21, Chapter 38, paragraph 38.22 (n), lists one of the priority areas on which UNEP should concentrate as "further developing assessment and assistance in cases of environmental emergencies". The present report summarizes the views of the Executive Director on the activities of the Centre during the experimental phase, with proposals for further action.

SUMMARY REVIEW AND PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER ACTION

4. The experimental phase of the Centre started in October 1991 and, by 31 December 1992, had incurred costs of $763,835, of which $330,142 came from counterpart contributions. The current staff of the Centre comprises four Professionals and three support staff.

5. During the experimental phase, activities were carried out on the basis of a programme of action and included consultations within UNEP (with the Industry and Environment Office Programme Activity Centre's awareness and preparedness for industrial accidents at the local level (APELL) programme, the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals (IRPTC) and the Secretariat of the Basel Convention) and with United Nations and other agencies and organizations, including non-governmental organizations and industry. There were also contacts with a number of developed and developing countries.

6. The work programme of the Centre during its experimental phase identifies some 17 tasks. Although progress has been made in practically all tasks, the complexity of some of those tasks and a lack of time has resulted in the fact that progress in certain of them is not as advanced as would be desired, e.g. definition of the precise role of the Centre, its competencies and the scope of its activities; preparation of a United Nations environmental emergency plan, defining the relative roles and responsibilities of agencies in the United Nations system.

7. Relations with other United Nations agencies have been pursued both bilaterally and within the framework of an inter-agency working group. Simple interface procedures, describing the sphere of responsibilities and actions to be taken, have been agreed between the Centre and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It must be acknowledged that relations between the Centre and other components of the United Nations system have not been sufficiently developed during the experimental phase. In order to achieve cost-effectiveness, create synergy and avoid unnecessary duplication of work, more effort is needed to establish close operational links between the Centre and well-established, key emergency response mechanisms, especially DHA.

8. Relations with international bodies outside the United Nations system have focused on the European Communities (EC). Regular liaison is maintained through the secondment of a Professional to the Centre by the EC and through regular briefing sessions. The Centre has also designated a liaison officer for the region covered by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

9. The Centre has taken steps to identify national focal points in selected countries. To date, 29 focal points have been established, 10 of them in developing countries which were selected because of their level of industrialization and their higher-than-normal potential risk of industrial accidents. The remaining focal points represent potential donor countries which were chosen because of their technical, scientific and practical capabilities to deal with environmental emergencies. Two meetings were held with national focal points during the experimental phase. Those have highlighted the potential donor countries' view that the Centre should act primarily as a broker between assisting countries and affected countries. The Centre needs to make further efforts to assess the true needs of developing countries.

10. Two new non-governmental organizations have been established which could have a bearing on the Centre's activities - the International Green Cross and the World Green Cross. Preliminary discussions have been held at the Centre with representatives of the World Green Cross. The long-term plans of these non-governmental organizations need to be clarified and possible working relationships with them need to be studied in order to seek further opportunities to increase the cost-effectiveness of the Centre.

11. With respect to the initiation of relations with industry and the private sector, only preliminary steps have been taken. Although much expertise and equipment exist in the private sector, it is necessary to address further the question of whether the Centre should directly access such assistance, through established contacts in industry, or whether access should be via the national focal points.

12. An agreement has been negotiated with the Government of Norway, whereby the latter undertakes to provide stand-by capacities to be placed at the Centre's disposal. There is a need to further study the appropriateness of proceeding with such bilateral agreements.

13. The Governing Council, in its decision 16/9, endorsed the proposal that the Centre "maintain rosters of experts and a list of appropriate equipment" to be used in response to man-made emergencies. In the light of advice received from national focal points and others, the information requested in a questionnaire distributed by the Centre is aimed at listing national capabilities for emergency environmental assistance, rather than compiling a list of named experts or details of equipment held. So far, 18 official replies have been received and the quality of information is variable. If the Centre is to serve as a UNEP focal point for emergency environmental incidents and act as a broker between requesting and assisting Governments, it is necessary that a more profound examination be made of the real areas of existing environmental expertise.

14. Progress has been made in developing the Centre's data and information management system, but more needs to be done to develop the Centre's own database, which at present holds only information on national focal points and the responses to the Centre's questionnaire on national capabilities. There is also a need to evaluate further the relevance of other databases and their integration into the Centre's system, where appropriate.

15. As regards mechanisms for dealing with requests for assistance, the Centre has prepared its own internal contingency plan which has been tested on two occasions. Internal procedures have been established to enable the Centre to mobilize assistance under its own auspices, if such assistance is requested by a Government affected by an environmental emergency. The question of appropriate response procedures is a matter for further close consultation with DHA.

16. The Centre's resources were tested in a simulation exercise carried out in Tunisia in February 1993. The exercise demonstrated that the Centre can act as an effective broker between a State requesting assistance and potential donor countries and that cooperation with other United Nations agency partners is feasible.

17. During its experimental phase the Centre responded to two actual emergencies: a leaking paint manufacturing plant in Barbados, and damage to the Mojkovac dam in Montenegro. Both incidents were brought to the Centre's attention by other intergovernmental agencies rather than by the countries affected and illustrate the need for further clarification as to how the Centre's resources should be activated. Both incidents also illustrate the fact that "man-made environmental emergencies" may have complex origins and that the division between "man-made" and "natural" environmental emergencies is to some extent false. The Montenegro case also illustrated that, in some circumstances, it is valuable for the Centre to send suitable experts on an assessment mission to evaluate the potential hazards on-site and to identify precisely the type of assistance which may need to be made available.

18. On the basis of the above summary review and evaluation, the Executive Director proposes to extend the experimental phase of the Centre for a two-year period, at a total cost to the Environment Fund of $2,000,000. However, additional resources, both human and financial, will be needed to enable the Centre to complete the experimental phase successfully. During this period, the Centre will concentrate on establishing itself as a small body for coordinating the response to environmental emergencies, in close cooperation with existing and emerging emergency response mechanisms in the United Nations system and elsewhere. It will act as a switchboard and clearing-house, and will focus on referral and information-sharing activities, thereby helping to optimize the integrated response capabilities of the United Nations system.

Annex

EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS CENTRE FOR URGENT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSISTANCE IN ITS EXPERIMENTAL PHASE

Summary of findings

1. The activities of the United Nations Centre for Urgent Environmental Assistance (UNCUEA) are governed by UNEP Governing Council decision 16/9. This mandate has given rise to certain ambiguities which have directly affected the activities of the Centre during its experimental phase and have led the Centre to interpret its role "ambitiously", in comparison to the mandate given, leading it in a more operational direction than was probably anticipated. There remains some confusion about the precise role of the Centre, its competencies and the scope of its activities. This uncertainty as to the precise functions and objectives has undoubtedly damaged the way in which it is perceived by potential partners.

2. The work programme of the Centre during its experimental phase has been governed by the Master Plan. There has never been an assessment of needs with regard to the work outlined in the Master Plan and the Plan which has the status of an internal UNEP document, has not been discussed with member Governments. The Plan is to some extent contradictory, recognizing, on the one hand, that the experimental phase should be a kind of feasibility study on which the Governing Council can take decisions as to the future, while on the other hand asserting that the Centre should be operational as soon as possible. The Plan identifies 17 tasks, but with no attempt to prioritize the activities. Although progress has been made in practically all the tasks, this lack of prioritization has resulted in the progress of certain tasks not being as advanced as it should be, e.g. the preparation of a United Nations environmental emergency plan, defining the relative roles and responsibilities of agencies in the United Nations system.

3. Relations with other United Nations agencies during the experimental phase have been pursued both bilaterally and within the framework of an inter-agency working group. It must be acknowledged that relations between UNCUEA and other units of the United Nations system have not always proceeded smoothly. The reasons for this are complex. More effort could have been made at a senior level to establish principles of cooperation and working relationships between UNCUEA and key agencies, especially DHA. Some agencies have also been sceptical about cooperation with UNCUEA, owing to uncertainties as to its future and its precise role. The inter-agency working group met on only one occasion, although a further two meetings had been envisaged.

4. Relations with other international bodies outside the United Nations system have focused on the European Communities (EC). Regular liaison is maintained through the secondment of a Professional to UNCUEA by the EC and through regular briefing sessions. The Centre has also designated a liaison officer for the region covered by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), but to date there has been no follow-up action to that initiative.

5. The Centre has taken steps to identify national focal points in selected countries. To date, 29 focal points have been established, 10 of them in developing countries which were selected because of their level of industrialization and the high-than-normal potential risk of industrial accidents. The remaining focal points represent potential donor countries, chosen because of their technical, scientific and practical capabilities to deal with environmental emergencies. Two meetings were held with national focal points during the experimental phase. Those have highlighted the potential donor countries' view that UNCUEA should act primarily as a broker between assisting countries and affected countries. More efforts

should have been made by UNCUEA during the experimental phase to assess the true needs of developing countries, i.e., the activities of the Centre have not been sufficiently "client-based".

6. Two new non-governmental organizations have been established which could have a bearing on UNCUEA's activities - the International Green Cross and the World Green Cross. the latter organization, in particular, claims that as a private foundation it can be organized more flexibly and efficiently than a state body and it is even prepared to assume the United Nations mandate to manage UNCUEA and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Preliminary discussions have been held at the Centre with representative of the World Green Cross. The long-term ambitions of this NGO and the potential conflict of interest with UNCUEA need to be clarified.

7. Although the Master Plan indicates that the UNCUEA will initiate relations with industry and the private sector, only preliminary steps have been taken. Although much expertise and equipment exists in the private sector, as a fundamental point of principle it is necessary to address the question of whether UCUEA should access such assistance directly through established contacts in industry or whether access should be via the national focal points. The United Nations system represents a mechanism for facilitating relations between member Governments and it may be unwise to prejudice these opportunities for cooperation through the pursuit of a potential, but uncertain, future relationship with industry.

8. Although the Governing Council mandate makes no reference to the need to pursue legal questions, the Centre has used a considerable amount of consultants' time for the drafting of potential framework agreements between UNCUEA and member Governments (both potential donors and recipients of assistance). It is by no means certain that such bilateral legal agreements are the most appropriate way to proceed; other international response mechanisms have not followed this route. However, UNCUEA has negotiated an agreement with the Government of Norway whereby the latter undertakes to provide stand-by capacities to be placed at UNEP's disposal. But the agreement lacks the necessary financial commitment to guarantee its effectiveness. Proposed memoranda of understanding with other United Nations agencies have been prepared but not concluded for a variety of reasons, principally the fact that UNCUEA is in an experimental phase. Simple interface procedures describing responsibilities and courses of action have been agreed between UNCUEA and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

9. One thing which is clear in the mandate given by the Governing Council is that the UNCUEA should "maintain rosters of experts and a list of appropriate equipment" to be used in response to man-made emergencies. In the light of advice received from national focal points and others, the information requested in a questionnaire sent out by UNCUEA is aimed at listing national capabilities for emergency environmental assistance, rather than compiling a list of named experts or details of equipment held. So far, 18 official replies have been received and the quality of the information is variable. If the Centre is to serve as a UNEP focal point for emergency environmental incidents and act as a broker between requesting the assisting Governments, it is necessary that a more profound examination be made of the real areas of existing environmental expertise.

10. During its experimental phase, UNCUEA has invested considerable resources (both financial and manpower) in establishing a state-of-the-art communications system. It is questionable whether UNCUEA was wise to develop its own "operations desk" communications system, which is designed

to enable the Centre to be fully independent. Given the uncertainties as to the future status of the Centre on the expiry of the experimental phase, it could have been more appropriate to explore the possibility of closer operational links with DHA.

11. Progress has been made in developing UNCUEA's data and information management system, but it is unclear how much further work needs to be done. It is evident, however, that more needs to be done to develop UNCUEA's own database, which at present holds only information on national focal points and the responses to the Centre's questionnaire on national capabilities. It is also evident that there is a need to evaluate further the relevance of other databases and their integration, into the UNCUEA system, where appropriate.

12. As regards mechanisms for dealing with requests for assistance, the Centre has prepared its own internal contingency plan which has been tested on two occasions. Internal procedures have been established to enable UNCUEA to mobilize assistance under its own auspices, if such assistance is requested by a Government affected by an environmental emergency. However, such procedures follow normal United Nations rules and are clearly not designed for mobilizing individual experts or assistance teams in response to sudden emergencies. The question of appropriate response procedures is clearly a matter for close cooperation and coordination with DHA, subject to clarification of UNCUEA's role as a broker.

13. The Centre's resources were tested in a simulation exercise carried out in February 1993. The exercise involved a heavy commitment in terms of the Centre's manpower, largely assisted by Norwegian experts. The simulation demonstrated that the Centre can act as an effective broker between a State requesting assistance and potential donor countries and that cooperation with other United Nations agency partners is feasible.

14. The Centre responded to two actual emergency incidents during the experimental phase: a leaking paint manufacturing plant in Barbados and damage to the Mojkovac dam in Montenegro. Both incidents were brought to UNCUEA's attention by other intergovernmental agencies, rather than by the countries affected and illustrate the need for further clarification as to how UNCUEA's resources should be activated. Both incidents also illustrate the fact that so-called "man-made environmental emergencies" may have complex origins and that the division between man-made and natural environmental emergencies is, to some extent, false. The Montenegro case also illustrated that, in some circumstances, it is valuable for UNCUEA to send suitable experts on an assessment mission to evaluate the potential hazards on-site and to identify precisely the type of assistance that may need to be made available.

15. The overall complement of the United Nations Centre appears to have been correctly assessed although the identification of expertise could be reconsidered. In particular, given the nature of the function of the Centre, it would be desirable to have a senior officer with "hands-on" experience of disaster-response management. It is also essential to have a senior officer who is very experienced in the United Nations system, in order to optimize the important matter of relations with United Nations agencies and also to manage the bureaucracy of the system in an effective manner.

16. It has not been possible to assess how the actual expenditures in 1992 compare with the budget appropriation of $1,394,000. During its experimental phase, the Centre has given thought to appropriate financial mechanisms to enable it to respond to sudden "man-made" environmental emergencies. However, such mechanisms would assume that an operational role would be played by the United Nations Centre and, on that basis, one can conclude that a general trust fund financed by voluntary contributions would be the most appropriate financial mechanism. The envisaged size of

the proposed trust fund seems large by comparison with intervention costs in other forums. The question of financial mechanisms is closely linked with fundamental decisions as to the future of the Centre, the nature of the Centre and its scope and activities (in particular how far it is to have an operational or an assessment role), and the most appropriate institutional arrangements within the United Nations system.

17. The appropriate institutional arrangements for the United Nations Centre will need to be considered in the longer term. There are various options which could be considered: a combination of the functions of both UNCUEA and the awareness and preparedness for industrial accidents at the local level (APELL) programme; the establishment of UNCUEA as a Programme Activity Centre (PAC) within UNEP; the establishment of UNCUEA within the authority of DHA; the establishment of UNCUEA as an inter-agency group, reporting directly to a United Nations under-secretary-general. If the Governing Council decides to continue with UNCUEA on an experimental basis, the most practical solution in the short term would be to maintain the present management structure, with the director of the Centre responsible to a supervisor in Nairobi and, ultimately, to the Executive Director herself. In addition, it would be desirable to incorporate in a more formal way a mechanism to allow representatives of member Governments the opportunity to comment and advise on the role of the Centre and how it carries out its mandate.

Recommendations

18. Although many positive achievements have been made during the experimental phase, it is clear that UNCUEA has not completely fulfilled its mandate, as set out in UNEP Governing Council decision 16/9. The following recommendations are based on the assumption that it would be premature to abandon the experiment at this stage:

(a) UNCUEA should remain in UNEP, with an extension of the experimental phase for a further two-year period, to be financed by the Environment Fund;

(b) The role and scope of UNCUEA should be defined more precisely, in particular concerning whether it should have an operational or a broker's role;

(c) The mandate should recognize that disasters are often complex and that UNCUEA's role should extend beyond the present limitation of "man-made" environmental emergencies;

(d) The comparative advantage of UNEP is not its operational capability but its environmental expertise; UNCUEA should research in greater depth the type of environmental expertise which may be made available from different donor countries;

(e) Relations with developing countries need to become more profound and those countries true needs in terms of environmental emergency response need to be identified;

(f) Relations with potential partners within the United Nations system need to be developed further in the context of the proposed United Nations environmental emergency plan, which should clarify responsibilities and working relationships;

(g) Relations with DHA should be strengthened at the senior level to optimize the integrated response capability of the United Nations system as a whole;

(h) The current ad hoc arrangements with national focal points should be formalized and the role of member Governments in steering UNCUEA's work should be clarified;

(i) UNCUEA should continue to develop appropriate response mechanisms in close cooperation with United Nations partners and national representatives, and should clarify its response procedures and develop its database and information system.